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MASSACHUSETTS EYE AND EAR INFIRMARY

243 CHARLES STREET
BOSTON 14, MASSACHUSETTS

April 15, 1959.

Mrs. Eugene J. Grow,
29 School Street,
Lebanon, New Hampshire.

Dear Mrs. Grow,

Attached is a manuscript of a paper, " T. R. " which I read before the New England Ophthalmological Society on April 13, 1959. You may have this copy to keep, or, if you prefer, you may discard it after you have read it.

As you may recall, this all began when some weeks ago you gave to Dr. Hanford Auten two lenses that had once belonged to Theodore Roosevelt. I am glad you and your husband kept the lenses for all these years. They served to reintroduce to me the personality of a president I had, strange to say, almost forgotten. I enjoyed preparing this little paper even though it is not a real work of scholarship. And that enjoyment I owe directly to you and your late husband.

You may be interested to know that the lenses and the information you gave me in your letter will be sent to the Roosevelt Collection in Widener Library, Harvard University. The curator of the Collection is most eager to have them and it seems this would be the proper place for them along with so many other things that once belonged to Theodore Roosevelt.

Thank you again for your help and thoughtfulness.

Yours truly,

Charles Snyder

Charles Snyder, Librarian.

" T. R. "

by

Charles Snyder*

Read before the New England Ophthalmological Society, April 13, 1959.

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" T. R. "

Some weeks ago I received from Dr. Hanford L. Auten of Hanover, New Hampshire, a small box containing two unmounted spectacle lenses. Written on the outside of the box was this legend: "The lenses herein were worn by Theodore Roosevelt during his entire presidency. He always had several pair available - as he was 8 D myopic and could see but little without them. New glasses were prescribed for him by Dr. E. J. Grow, U. S. Navy, at the time he left Washington to go to Africa."

Upon examination it was found that the two lenses were identical in all respects. However they were for - 7 D not - 8 D. It may have been that Dr. Grow undercorrected Roosevelt, not an uncommon practice with a myope of this degree. It was a little surprising to find that very little correction had been made for astigmatism.

In an effort to learn something about Dr. Grow, the ophthalmologist who had refracted Roosevelt, a letter was written to his widow. Mrs. Grow kindly responded with the information that her late husband, a New Hampshire man, educated at Dartmouth College, Dartmouth Medical School and Cornell, had been the first medical specialist in the U. S. Navy. Dr. Grow had spent most of his professional life in the Navy and his official obituary credits him with having been instrumental, more than anyone else, in having established standards of vision in the Navy.

It was Dr. Grow's fortune to have examined Roosevelt's eyes at a critical point in the president's ocular history. And it is

a credit to Dr. Grow's discretion that he was selected to perform the examination, for he thus became a party to one of the best kept secrets of Theodore Roosevelt's life.

Several present day reports agree that in 1908, the time of Dr. Grow's examination and the last year of Roosevelt's presidency, Roosevelt was blind or nearly blind in his left eye. One biographer states that not more than a half dozen people in the country were aware of this physical defect. Roosevelt was very sensitive about the defect and made every effort to conceal it from his family, his friends, a nd his political associates and opponents.

So well was this secret kept that in much of the biographical literature on Roosevelt there is no mention of the fact and of those works that do mention it only one author of recent times seems to have had in his possession the true story of the unilateral blindness of Theodore Roosevelt.

This author was Henry F. Pringle whose biography of Theodore Roosevelt was published in 1931. While writing his book Mr. Pringle contacted Dr. William H. Wilmer then professor of ophthalmology at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Mr. Pringle did not see fit to use in his book all of Dr. Wilmer's reply. In addition the terminology that Mr. Pringle used clouded the subject rather than illuminated it.

The curator of the Roosevelt Collection in Widener Library, Mr. Robert H. Haynes, has been good enough to send me a letter taken from Mr. Pringle's notes. I have every reason to believe that this letter tells the true story of the cause and nature of Theodore Roosevlet's blindness.

I would like to read it to you.

"President Roosevelt was seen with Admiral Rixey, December 12, 1904. At that time the President gave a history of having noticed for a while a dimness before the left eye after wrestling, and the further history that about two weeks ago, he was struck in the left eye while boxing. Since that time, he had noticed black spots before the eye. At first it seemed rather central and blurred the vision, but, now, it seems to have moved about two inches to the left.

"President Roosevelt was very near-sighted, but with the proper glass he had unusually keen and accurate vision. Examination at the time showed a few spots of hemorrhage in the retina of the left eye and some floating opacities in the vitreous.

"After much persuasion, President Roosevelt consented to rest up for a short while, giving up his usual vigorous exercises. He was rather loath to do so at first, because he had an engagement to box with Muldoon about noon, for jiu jitsu with a Japanese from Annapolis at eight in the morning, single sticks between time and a long walk or ride in the afternoon. However, he was told that the President of the United States should at least have as good treatment as an ignorant pauper in the hospital, which appealed to him, and he did make an excellent patient. The danger at the time was of detachment of the retina from the blow, or the other one of cataract from the disturbance of the lens from the blow. The President was seen several times later after a number of years, and at that time the retina was in good condition. The Hemorrhages had absorbed and the lens remained clear. There were only a few opacities in the vitreous left. However, in later life, a cataract did form, reducing vision in the left eye to perception

of light. The type of cataract was one that could have been removed but as long as vision in the other eye was quite perfect, it was not necessary to do so.

"It might be interesting to know that the last Sunday that I spent in America, before going to France in the early summer of 1918 I passed with Colonel Roosevelt at Oyster Bay. I arrived at in the afternoon about half-past three or four, and found him sitting on the floor playing with his daughter Ethel's children. He jumped up with great alacrity, and said, 'Wilmer, behold in me the matural born grandfather!' I congratulated him upon his seeming good health and vigor and asked him how he felt. He replied, 'Well, apart from the fact that I am blind in one eye and cannot hear out of one ear, I am fit as a fiddle.'"

This letter of Dr. Wilmer's should put an end to the story that Theodore Roosevelt suffered from a detachment of the retina. The pathology was that of a cataract, possibly of traumatic origin. If a detachment of the retina did exist, it had its origin after the formation of the cataract.

The story as related by Wilmer, variations of this story are told by other, date the history of the case from a boxing bout Roosevelt had with a Naval or Army officer in 1904. Roosevelt himself would never reveal the identity of the boxer. He dismissed the subject by saying ". . . to have told him would have only caused him to feel badly."

There is one other known trauma to Roosevelt's eyes, unfortunately the record does not tell which eye was involved. In 1908, the last year of his presidency, Roosevelt was playing tennis and was hit with a ball hard enough to shatter his glasses and to lacerate the skin about his

eye. Such a blow, had it been on the left eye, might well have been another contributing cause to the formation of the cataract.

Here again the well-kept secret of Roosevelt's eyes prevents the forming of a positive opinion on the subject.

That T. R. should have demanded secrecy about his physical infirmity is not surprising. He was proud of his strength and intolerant of any display on his part of bodily weakness. To him the human body was something that could be controlled, driven, developed. He proved this to his own satisfaction when he took his own sickly, skinny, boyish body and developed it by sheer force into a magnificient muscular machine. He was constantly proving to himself and to others that he was master of his body, that it would do anything he commanded. On two separate occasions his normally obedient body, driven to a point beyond endurance, failed him. And on these two occasions Theodore Roosevelt gave serious thought to suicide. This from a man who always turned toward the public a face of absolute determination. (These two physical failures had nothing to do with his vision.)

It is a tribute to the man that, newly blind in one eye, he was able to go on his African trip, live the life on safari, and shoot more than his share of game. The trophies of this trip and other hunting trips he prided more "than any of the books he had written or the political achievements that had already carried his name across the country. They meant manhood to him, manhood, won at a price; token of triumph of character over physical inadequacy, testimony to daring, strength, endurance, straight aim and steady nerves, none of them innate, all laboriously acquired." (Hagedorn)p.5.)

Roosevelt's ocular history began in his 13th year. In his autobiography appears the following story: "It was this summer that I got my first gun, and it puzzled me to find that my companions seemed to see things to shoot which I could not see at all. One day they read aloud an advertisement in huge letters on a distant billboard, and I then realized that something was the matter, for not only was I unable to read the sign, but I could not even see the letters. I spoke to my father of this, and soon afterwards got my first pair of spectacles, which literally opened an entirely new world to me. I had no idea how beautiful the world was until I got those spectacles. I had been a clumsy and awkward little boy, and while much of my clumsiness and awkwardness was doubtless due to general characteristics, a good deal of it was due to the fact that I could not see and yet was wholly ignorant that I was not seeing. The recollection of this experience gives me a keen sympathy with those who are trying in our public schools and elsewhere to remove the physical causes of deficiency in children, who are often unjustly blamed for being obstinate or unambitious, or mentally stupid." (Autobiography, p. 18).

This is not an extraordinary story when it is remembered that in 1871 (Roosevelt was born in 1858) medical refraction was in its infancy. Snellen had published his test charts in 1862, the English edition of Donders' 'Anomalies of Refraction' had appeared in 1864; and also that it was not until 1868 that the Massachusetts Charitable Eye & Ear Infirmary had bought its first set of trial lenses. Thus the Roosevelt story has many counterparts among the children of his generation. It was in part due to the encouragement that Roosevelt gave in

his autobiography and elsewhere that vision testing is now and has been for many years a routine part of every school's health program.

Once Roosevelt put glasses on his nose he could not live without them. Like every other person with a high degree of myopia he became a slave to his glasses, afraid and unable to move about the world without them. Only another myope can appreciate the urgent necessity of the precautions Roosevelt took prior to his participation in the Cuban campaign of the Spanish-American War.

"With military foresight he had looked ahead toward the predicament in which he would find himself, due to his bad eyesight, in the event that he lost or broke his glasses. He ordered his optician to make up a dozen pairs of steel-rimmed spectacles. These were stowed in all parts of his uniform, while several pairs were fastened with light thread into the lining of his campaign hat. . . . and he placed two or three additional pairs in his saddle bags, further to avoid the dread possibility that he might not be able to see the enemy he had come so far to annihilate." (Pringle, p. 184-5).

In her letter Mrs. Grow states that Roosevelt took nine pairs of glasses with him on his African trip.

This practice of carrying several pairs of glasses on his person resulted in saving Roosevelt's life on one occasion. In Milwaukee in 1912 when he was campaigning for the presidency against Taft and Wilson, Roosevelt was shot by an assassin. The bullet was stayed in its course because it passed through a spectacle case and a folded speech he had in his pocket. Had either item not been in his inner coat pocket Roosevelt could have been mortally wounded.

Any sketch of Theodore Roosevelt, no matter how brief, would be incomplete without mention of his intellectual achievements. In the field of politics he was called everything from a loud-mouthed adolescent to the greatest leader since Jesus Christ, but his achievements as a scholar, writer, and historian have never been seriously criticized.

A recent biographer of Roosevelt termed his work "The Seven Worlds of Theodore Roosevelt". It is understandable how this author came to use this title, for the man Roosevelt was certainly an inhabitant of more than one world. In which world he found the most personal satisfaction, in which world he gave the most to mankind, it is hard to say. However, Roosevelt's world of the written word is the one in which we can come closest to him. Here to us is revealed an extraordinary mind - one that contained interests ranging from the instruction of children to the governing of the world, from Gaelic literature to the coloring of sparrows, from the history of the War of 1812 to his own autobiography.

Theodore Roosevelt loved books; he read thousands of them on every conceivable subject. This vast amount of reading was made easy for him because he was one of the fortunate few with the ability to scan a printed page. And he was further blessed with a photographic memory: he remembered everything he read.

This is the Roosevelt that appeals most to another myope.

When I was a boy Theodore Roosevelt was my favorite of all the men who had occupied the White House. In my boyish imagination I was able to identify myself with him first, because our birthdays were at about the same date and second, because he had been a myope and I was a myope. His correction was - 7 D and mine was - 8 D.

At this point, however, similarities between Theodore Roosevelt and Charles Snyder cease, because, as you know, he grew up to be president of the United States and I grew up to be librarian of the Lucien Howe Library of Ophthalmology.

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